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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WEST

An address given in Edmonton by J. L. Irwin, Supervisor of Publications, Alberta Government, at the Cosmopolitan Club luncheon, Corona Hotel on February 20th, and at the Kiwanis Club luncheon, Macdonald Hotel on February 26th, 1945.

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:

I would like to express my appreciation for your kindness and for the distinction shown in making me your guest speaker for today.

I have chosen the historical background of Canada's North-west as a subject. It is an interesting but not an easy one. Over a period of about three centuries the early pioneers were not numerous, were widely scattered and left very few records of their experiences and adventures.

One starts presumably with the days of the merry monarch, Charles II of England. In a moment of generosity he disposed of an area of land in North-west Canada about the size of Europe by making a present of it to a handful of favourites. These gentlemen, under the captaincy of that romantic figure, Rupert of the Rhine, gave themselves the name of A Company of Gentlemen Adventurers trading into Hudson's Bay, a name which is now historic in Canada.

It is highly probable that Charles was not conscious of any particular generosity in this action, that he regarded this huge territory on the other side of the globe as a desert waste, and that anyone wishing to risk their lives in exploring it must be more or less crazy. He might have been intrigued, however, with the promise of rich furs, which would eventually come to England as a result of the experiment. They came, in a quantity and quality that must have been extremely satisfying to him.

The gentlemen adventurers arrived on the shores of Hudson's Bay, built their forts, and with the supplies brought with them settled down to trade with the Indians. It was customary at that time to keep a number of muskets for trading purposes. These weapons boasted a long barrel. The length of the barrel was not in any way intended to increase the efficiency of the weapon. There was a more sinister reason. An Indian would be shown one. The unsuspecting redskin would desire it and would then be told that it was his if he brought a pile of furs which, if laid on the ground, one on top of the other, would reach to the muzzle. As each single pelt in those days represented a good deal of money, and as such a pile of furs would represent a very respectable fortune, it requires no particular stretch of imagination to discover who got the better of the deal.

Those were days when human life was not worth the snap of anyone's fingers. Should a white man decide to risk his life, exposing it to the dangers of hostile Indians, wild animals or other hazards in the hope of securing some of the riches which this unknown land might offer, and should he carry on such a venture on his own within someone else's territory, the prospects were extremely unlikely that he would ever see his native land again.

Following this period, France added to her dominions across the sea by the acquisition of Quebec, known as New France. Louis, apparently, didn't think much of the new world either and started to give away large tracts of the colony to his favourites. When the recipients of his bounty attempted to express their gratitude, he would nonchalently murmur "It is nothing. Just a few acres of snow". Thus started the old seigneuries of Quebec.

At a considerably later date the United States was claiming the territory now covered by the States of Oregon and Washington. Britain also had a claim, so a representative of the British Government was sent out to make a report.

After much travelling, to travel in those days was rather strenuous, the British official arrived at this part of the Pacific coast. He was not impressed and immediately decided that fishing in this part of the world would not be good. Without delay he returned home, made out an adverse report, and the States of Oregon and Washington were lost forever to the British Empire.

On March 30th, 1867 the great State of Alaska was sold by Russia to the United States. The purchase price was $7,200,000 - less than the cost of many a manufacturing plant erected today. We could have bought it. We had a definite geographical claim. Canadian territory completely surrounded it, except for the western boundary of the Pacific Ocean. But apparently we didn't want it. In October, 1903, a commission was appointed to decide on an adjustment of the Alaskan boundary. Canada claimed some of the western section in proximity to the waterways. The commission was made up of three Americans, two Canadians and Lord Alverstone, representing the British Government. In voting, Lord Alverstone supported the Americans' claim, which settled the matter - four to two - to the intense resentment of the Canadians. In 1932, Alaska, with its handful of population, valued the exports of the state for that year at a figure exceeding $72,000,000. Alaska's development has not yet really started. It was bought for $7,200,000 - and it might have been ours. But we considered it valueless.

At the beginning of the 1880's a few enthusiasts in Eastern Canada conceived the idea of a transcontinental railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific. They were regarded as quite mad. The question of raising the finances for such a venture met with failure after failure. Eventually in desperation the promotors crossed the Atlantic to tackle the Lord Rothschild of that day. Arriving in London they found he was at his country place near Tring, some 30 miles to the north of the capital. They went there and discovered the great man in one of his conservatories sampling his hot-house grapes. They put their proposition up to him. It was a sunny day in spring, the grapes were ripe and his lordship was in an expansive mood. Examining the security they offered, and being satisfied with it, he immediately promised the millions they asked for, informing them at the same time that they were completely crazy, that the land the railway was to cross was an unprofitable desert and that the scheme was doomed to failure before it started. And so the great Canadian Pacific Railway was launched.

I have endeavoured so far to present to you the attitude of the old world to the new in by-gone days, the complete lack of faith as to its value, the absence of any enthusiasm regarding its possibilities. It is better today, but the disinterestedness still exists.

A few years ago an article by a well known English author appeared in a prominent English monthly magazine. He was dealing with the subject of radium and made the statement that the production of this important metal in the United States had been so extensive that it had resulted in reducing its price all over the world. This was more than I could stand, so I wrote to him.

I stated that I too was an Englishman and as such I deplored the geographical mentality of my countrymen at home regarding the North American continent. I pointed out that the 49th parellel divided Canada from the United States, that the United States during the first great war had produced only a very small amount of radium and had since produced none at all, nor were they likely to, for the simple reason that they did not have it; that the mine he referred to was north of the 49th parellel, was within the Arctic Circle as a matter of fact, at Great Bear Lake, Northwest Territories, in the British Territory of Canada; that it was the largest radium mine in the world, had smashed the Belgian Congo monopoly on the metal, bringing radium down to a third of its former value and making it available to all mankind. Such being the case I would appreciate a correction in the next issue of the magazine. The correction was made and I received a charming letter from the author expressing his regrets, stating that he really knew his Canada and couldn't imagine how he could have been so stupid.

The reason for this error I think is simply that the outside world cannot get used to the idea of the great area of western Canada being mineralized, industrialized or for that matter of doing anything beyond farming, ranching and chasing buffalo, which, of course, died out in the 70's.

This lack of interest in the West is not only confined to the old world. It is prevalent in Eastern Canada as well. A prominent Albertan said to me once that the mental picture of a map of Canada carried around by the average easterner showed the western boundary of civilization in a line drawn roughly through Western Ontario. Anything west of that was simply agricultural, the poor relation of the Dominion, but a poor relation that nevertheless had its good points in that it raised wheat and cattle and was a good market for the industrialized east in the matter of farm implements and general products. The real assets of the west are still almost entirely unknown to the outside world. How many know for instance that Alberta possesses about four-fifths of Canada's coal reserves, coal of all classifications and of extremely high quality, more than 90 per cent. of Canada's oil, 75 per cent. of her natural gas and the greatest bituminous sand accumulation in the world, containing the highest grade asphalt. Beyond the province to the north are the wealthy gold mines of Yellowknife at Great Slave Lake and still further north is the radium mine at Great Bear Lake. To the west in British Columbia at Pinchi Lake is the largest mercury mine in the British Empire. There are many Albertans even who do not know these facts about the West - facts surrounding the ever steadily increasing of our natural resources development and our rather noticeable advancement in manufacturing and industrial progress during the war.

Around 1700 there were no white men in the territory of Alberta. It was a land of Indians and buffalo. The principal Indian tribes were the Blackfeet, Stoneys and Prairie and Mountain Crees. Stony Plain, by the way, was not so named because of the stony nature of the ground, but because the Stoney Indians used to camp at that point when travelling towards Fort Edmonton.

The first white man to attempt the overland journey through the West was Pierre Gaulthier de la Verendyre, but he only approached the outposts and died in 1749 without living to see the promised land. In 1743, his two sons, Francois and Louis-Joseph, whilst exploring the Missouri River, came to a point some 500 miles from where Edmonton now stands and saw the peaks of the Rockies. It is the first recorded instance of their being sighted by white men.

The first white men to enter Alberta were a party of Frenchmen of the order of Jacques Repentigny de St. Pierre, who in 1751 made their way up the South Saskatchewan River and founded Fort Jonquiere in the vicinity of Calgary. In 1753 a gentleman with the impressive title of the Chevalier Saint-Luc de la Corne received the commission of carrying on the Verendryes' work, but there appears to be no record of his travels.

The first entry into the Edmonton area of Alberta was made in 1754 by a young Englishman named Anthony Hendry, a clerk of the Hudson's Bay Company. He is reported to have been an irresponsible youth, not thought very highly of by his superiors and it was only with difficulty that he obtained permission to make the exploration. He did it alone, however, which was something of an achievement in those days when one considers the hostile nature of the unknown land he entered. It is reported that he worked his canoe up the North Saskatchewan and passed the site of where Fort Edmonton, and later of course Edmonton, were to stand. To him alone goes the honour of being the discoverer of northern Alberta.

A gap of some forty years goes by during which time there seems to be little record of events, which takes us to 1792, when the great Alexander Mackenzie enters the scene. In the summer of that year he discovered the mighty river which bears his name. He was looking for an inland north-west passage to the Pacific and he thought the Mackenzie would turn West and take him to it. But it took him to the Arctic Ocean of course. Nothing daunted he worked his way back over the many hundreds of miles upstream, crossing the corners of Great Slave and Athabaska lakes, up the Slave and Athabaska Rivers till he came to the Peace River. Entering it he continued till eventually late in the year he arrived at the junction of the Peace and Smoky rivers, nine miles upstream from where Peace River town is now situated. He decided to camp there for the winter and built Fort Fork on the south bank. I visited this site whilst on a Government mission some years ago and took some photographs including one of the original fireplace, which was in a good state of

preservation. The south bank of the Peace at that point is not settled like the north, and it took a long search before this site was discovered.

Early in the spring of 1793, with a few unwilling Indian guides, Mackenzie continued up the Peace, past the long Hudson Hope canyon, through hostile Indian country and over seemingly impassable mountain ranges until at last he came to the Pacific Ocean he had sought for so long at Bella Coola. Inscribing his name and the date of the discovery on a rock he returned to Fort Fork, not without much difficulty and hardship, making the journey to the Pacific and back in about three months, an amazing accomplishment. In recent years the rock at Bella Coola on which he had written his name was the object of a lengthy search. At last it was found, the writing on it almost obliterated. The inscription was done over in indelible colours and the rock was visited by the late Lord Tweedsmuir during an official tour of the Canadian North-west.

During the years 1794 and 1795 the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-west Company each built a fort where the town of Fort Saskatchewan now stands, close to the mouth of the Sturgeon River. In 1808 a major attack by Indians drove out the occupants and the two forts were burned down. Following this, a new site for a fort was chosen on the North Saskatchewan River, which was that of the present City of Edmonton. The fort on completion bore the name of Fort Edmonton, a compliment paid by the chief factor, George Sutherland, to his clerk, John Pruden, who came from Edmonton in the north of London. Coming from Highgate in the north of London myself, I used often to bicycle with my brothers through Edmonton, famous for John Gilpin's ride, on expeditions into the country. I little thought in those days that I was destined to spend the greater part of my life in another Edmonton on the opposite side of the world.

The year 1821 saw the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company with the North-west Company after many years of bloody civil war between the two rival companies. The amalgamation carried on the name of the Hudson's Bay Company.

By 1823 John Rowand, the chief factor at that time, was worried about the continuing Indian attacks and decided to enlarge and strengthen Fort Edmonton. This was done, and when finished it measured 310 feet in length by 210 in width, a palisade 20 feet in height with two-story block-houses at each corner, the second story leaning over the first to make it impossible for attacking Indians to scale the walls. The interior was large enough for all auxiliary buildings and supplies. Rowand was laughed at for his caution and they named the new fort "Rowand's Folly." At a later date the first contingent of the Mounted Police referred to it as "The White House". But Rowand's precautions were justified. Had they not been taken the fate of Edmonton's fort might have been the same as the previous ones at Fort Saskatchewan and there might have been no city here today bearing this name.

Until 1840 the language of Edmonton was French. The first of the early missionaries arrived in 1846, a Belgian by the name of R. P. de Smet, who had made his way from the Pacific Coast and the United States, where he had been evangelizing the Indians. Just before reaching Edmonton his guides deserted him; he lost his way and nearly perished before he at length discovered the fort. Other missionaries of that early time were Rundle, the two McDougals, father and son, after whom the church in Edmonton is named, and, at a later date, Dr. McQueen.

Father Lacombe arrived in 1852 and founded the Lac Ste Anne mission. He became the greatest influence in the west, great in character and simplicity, loved by both Indian and whites and was the principal cause for holding the Blackfeet down at the time of the Rebellion.

Crowfoot, chief of the Blackfeet, was another outstanding character of that time, who kept his braves in check and on different occasions prevented them from rising. The Blackfeet were the most warlike of all the Indian nations. Between Father Lacombe, Richard Hardisty, the chief factor at Fort Edmonton, and Chief Crowfoot there existed a friendly understanding and co-operation which guaranteed more than anything else a security in this wild and hostile land.

One of the reasons which cemented the friendship between Hardisty and Crowfoot was that the latter on a certain occasion fell ill.

During his illness he dreamt that only one person could save him and make him well again, and that was a white man with red hair. Hardisty was the only one who fitted this description, so, attended by his braves, he made the long 200 mile journey north to Edmonton from the Calgary area, which was the Blackfeet country. As he approached the fort he started to feel better, and was convinced it was because he was getting nearer the one man who could cure him. Hardisty with the few medicines he always kept on hand gave him what he thought was needed and the great chief recovered. It was reported there was nothing seriously wrong with him anyway. But the recovery which followed started the friendly alliance. There was a tremendous business of exchange of presents, of considerable value on each side. The incident played a major part at a later date in the prevention of Indian uprisings.

Gold was discovered in the Saskatchewan River around 1860. Tom Clover was the first man to mine it. Clover Bar, the fertile farming district south-east of the city, is named after the bar where Clover worked.

The year 1870 saw the territories of the Hudson's Bay Company, known as Prince Rupert Land, pass to the Dominion in exchange for certain land adjustments which were made. In 1872 a gold miner, by the name of Nicholas Sheran, from Fort Benton, Montana, arrived in southern Alberta and opened Alberta's first coal mine. The Indians, having told him of the "great black diamonds" on the banks of the Oldman River, proceeded to help him dig them out and break them up. Across the river, just opposite the mine, the last great battle of the west between the Indians and the whites had been fought only two years before. It was known as the Battle of Lethbridge. A monument in the Lethbridge civic gardens commemorates the opening of Sheran's mine. For almost a hundred years the early explorers had all made references to the great coal exposures of Alberta and marked them on early maps, but Sheran was the first man to open a mine in the province.

The first contingent of the Royal North-west Mounted Police, fifty strong, arrived at Edmonton in 1874, moving on to Fort Saskatchewan the following spring. The first telegraph connected Edmonton with the outside world in 1876 and in 1880 Frank Oliver, later to become Minister of the Interior at Ottawa, opened the first newspaper in Edmonton - the first in Western Canada. Railway connection was established in 1891 with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway (Calgary and Edmonton Railway) at Strathcona (South Edmonton). Edmonton s population rose to 7,000 in 1904 and the next year Alberta became a province. The Canadian Northern Railway in the same year reached the city from the East, establishing the first transcontinental line with the city. In 1909 the Grand Trunk Pacific passing through Edmonton reached the Pacific Coast and the University of Alberta opened its first faculty of arts and sciences with 45 enrolments as compared with more than 1,300 today. This brings us to 1914, when the first great war began. This was also the year when oil was discovered in Alberta.

If I was asked the question, "What is Canada?" I think I would reply somewhat as follows:-

Canada is the largest country of the Americas and the third largest in the world, with an area of 3,700,000 square miles sweeping north from the United States boundary to the north pole, and containing 48° of latitude and 84° of longitude. Canada is a vast treasure house which contains almost every mineral known to the world of today. A vast treasure house of minerals and forests, of fertile prairies and inland waterways, of fish, game and illimitable fur resources of immense value. A land of great beauty, beauty of forest and stream, mountain and pasture lands, much of which is beyond description and must be seen to be readily understood, beauty which is intensified by the clearness of atmosphere, so characteristic of this western land, making the air like wine - intensified by the brilliance of the western sunshine which accentuates the detail of every light and shade - of even greater beauty when the day draws to a close, and the swiftly changing colours blend one with the other just before the dusk. This is Canada.

With a population of only about eleven millions, a mere 1/188th part of the world's total, Canada today stands first in the world in the production of radium, nickel, asbestos, platinum, newsprint

and in the supply of foods for the United Nations; second in the production of aluminium, wood pulp, hydro-electric power and in the building of cargo ships; third in the production of copper, lead, zinc, third amongst the United Nations' sea powers and the third greatest trading nation in the world of today; fourth in the production of United Nations' war supplies. With only a brief historical background and a minimum of population, this is what Canada already has done. It is an impressive record.

If, with a mere skeleton population, we have travelled this far in the last half century, what will we do in the one which lies ahead?

If we are at last to be permitted an immigration policy which will give us the man power we have needed so much and for so long to develop and produce on a major scale the vast natural wealth which is our heritage, by means of which employment will be prevalent throughout the land, and therefore security and prosperity; if we are able in the post-war days to move forward together on a general basis of peace and justice, sanity and freedom, humanity and, above all, tolerance; if we can co-operate, not only with the peoples of lands beyond our borders, but, and this is far more important, co-operate with each other within our own; if we can secure at long last a United Canada within the United Nations, then the world is ours and all that is therein. We shall have become a world power indeed to contend with.

We can do this if we want to. We must do it. We owe it to ourselves. We owe it to something else as well - to the first pioneers who have left us a background, a great tradition, which will be preserved forever in the archives of this country.

We have risen to fame and greatness by means of the structure we have built, but the foundation on which this structure stands was laid a century and a half ago by Alexander Mackenzie, Peter Pond, David Thompson and those who followed later, who came to this vast and unknown empire in the back of beyond to learn its secrets, obey its laws and secure its wealth.

These are the people who built the foundation of our modern structure of today. They built it with the ingredients of vision and determination, of great courage and even greater faith in all that was to come.

Each one of these ingredients has played its own vital and important part. Each has made its own definite contribution to the proud place which this land of Canada holds in the world of today.